In the Moscow Slums

by

Walter Chaw

Karen Shakhnazarov's films play fast and loose across timelines and genres in wide, sweeping loops that feel not entirely unlike Alexander Sokurov's gorgeous tracking one-shot experiment, *The Russian Ark* (2002). Like, Sokurov, Shakhnazarov is devoted to not just the preservation of, but the exalting of, the *mythologizing* of his people and the artists who provided definition and gave contextualization for a national character indicated by grim perseverance, a poet's dark irony, and the survivor's stoic shouldering of centuries of pain. His filmography cuts a swath, smooth and liquid through Russian history. His best films pay homage to the great Russian authors and their key works: Bulgakov, Solzhenitsyn, Dostoevsky of course, scabrous at times in their absurdity as in his masterpiece *Zerograd (*1988), one of the best films anywhere of the 1980s. He references Tolstoy of course whose *Anna Karenina* Shakhnazarov adapted into an eight-episode limited series starring Elizaveta Boyarskaya in 2017. He even pulls Herman Melville into his cultural history in *White Tiger* (2012) where tank driver Naydenov (Aleksey Vertkov), driven mad by the trauma of war, fixates on a phantom tank that he conflates with the periodic eruptions of conflict that mark the story of his homeland like chapters in an epic and unfinished book.

Shifting from the great novelists, Shakhnazarov's latest film, *In the Moscow Slums* (2023), is a sly, deceptively-lighthearted ode to his nation's great dramatists. He borrows sweeping thematic elements from Pushkin's *Little Tragedies* in the film's central Virgilian dyad and Pushkin's theory of "nemesis" in questions of fate; from the social miserablism of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*; and from real-life figures in the arts like founders of the Moscow Art Theater Konstantin Stanislavski (Konstantin Kryukov), Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (Aleksander Olsehsko) and legendary journalist Vladimir Gilyarovsky (Mikhail Porechenkov). For that dash of western spice? That pull of an extra-Soviet text to demonstrate the elasticity of his art and its ability to assimilate foreign influences into his nationalistic philosophy? It's all loosely based on Arthur Conan Doyle's Orientalist Sherlock Holmes adventure, *The Sign of the Four* (1890). Shakhnazarov's film is set in Moscow, 1902, as actor/director Stanislavski, the originator of "Method Acting" favored by actors of the New American Cinema of the 1970s, struggles with the final monologue of inveterate card-cheat Satine. It goes:

> When I'm drunk? Yes—then I like everything—right—He prays? That's fine! A man may believe or not—that's his own affair—a man is free—he pays for everything himself—belief or unbelief—love—wisdom . . . a man pays for everything—and that's just why he's free! Man is—truth! And what is man? It's neither you nor I nor they—oh, no—it's you and they and I and the old man—and Napoleon—Mohammed—all in one! [*Outlines vaguely in the air the contour of a human being*] Do you understand? It's tremendous! It contains the beginning and the end of everything—everything is in man—and everything exists for him! Man alone exists—everything else is the creation of his hands and his brain! Man! It is glorious! It sounds—oh—so big! Man must be respected—not degraded with pity—but respected, respected! Let us drink to man, Baron! [*Rises*] It is good to feel that you are a man! I'm a convict, a murderer, a crook—granted!—When I'm out on the street people stare at me as if I were a scoundrel—they draw away from me—they look after me and often they say: "You dog! You humbug! Work!" Work? And

what for? to fill my belly? [*Roars with laughter*] I've always despised people who worry too much about their bellies. It isn't right, Baron! It isn't! Man is loftier than that! Man stands above hunger!

Stanislavski stops mid-read and sits at the edge of the proscenium, despondent. He calls his partner Nemirovich-Danchenko into counsel and dismisses the rest of the cast. "It all feels off," he says, he doesn't buy Gorky as a humanist, he can't imagine this speech taking place in a cellar being used as temporary shelter for a collection of homeless people, he disagrees with his partner that Gorky has created a play that is a celebration of endurance in the face of unimaginable hardship. Stanislavski has the brilliant idea of arranging an introduction to "slum" journalist Gilyarovsky - a man described by compatriots like the author Konstantin Paustovsky as "truly picturesque, both in his biography, looks, speech, manners, in his childishness and in his multifaceted and bubbling talent." He was revered amongst Muscovites at the turn of the last century for providing a voice for the underprivileged through his poetry, stories, and books like *The Stories of the Slums* and *Moscow and Muscovites* (1924). Photographs of the man find an imposing figure, the very archetype of a Zaporozhian Cossack complete with kubanka and handlebar mustache. Tales of his strength were legion. It was rumored "Uncle Gilly" could bend a steel bar. Conan Doyle describes Sherlock Holmes with similar physical attributes, able to bend a fireplace poker back into shape after a braggart deforms it in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (1892). I wonder if this confluence is what first inspired Shakhnazarov and his screenwriter Ekaterina Kochetkova to mix Gilyarovsky's writings with Conan Doyle's for *In the Moscow Slums*?

In any case, Stanislavski, in pursuit of "truth" through his "Method" of embodying the characters he plays in body and soul (a method popularized in the west by the likes of Marlon Brando and Robert De Niro) accompanies Gilyarovsky into the "hell" of the Khitrovka area of Moscow, the provence of "runaway convicts, bandits and murderers." He tells the director he doesn't enter Khitrovka without brass knuckles and a bullwhip, both of which will be getting a workout during the course of the film. Their first meeting takes place in a high-end restaurant complete with snooty waitstaff who preside over grand tableside presentations and look down their noses at Gilyarovsky's provocative meal choices of

beggars' soup and jellied meats. The class commentary is not subtle in *In the Moscow Slums* and some critics of the film have taken issue with it as being facile and cartoonish. But I think such reads are missing the larger point, supported by Shakhnazarov's four-decade long body of work, that *In the Moscow Slums* is actually a satire of the kind of romanticization unto glorification of poverty that is arguably the foundation of most liberal bourgeoise interpretations of the lower classes. Gilyarovsky is an exaggeration of Gilyarovsky - he's not just the "king of reportage" as his contemporaries dubbed him, he has the ratiocinative mind of the greatest fictional detective of all time, can take down a quartet of armed thugs with just his bare hands, and has earned the grudging respect of an overmatched constabulary led by Detective Rudnikov (Evgeniy Stychkin), this story's Inspector Lestrade. When Gilyarovsky is invited to a chichi eatery rife with pretensions, of course he's going to pop the balloon with the needle of his carefully-sharpened, man-of-the-people authenticity.

If he didn't portray himself as thus exactly in his writing, Stanislavski's perception of Gilyarovsky's reputation as a "real" man surviving in the "real" world, unmediated by the laws of civilization, begins to push the outer bounds of who he might really have been. Neither of these men are any longer "just" men, especially when reconstituted in a film in this way seeking to tell what is essentially the origins of the Moscow Theater and, by extension, Russia's proud tradition of dramatic arts up to and including several of motion picture's first masterpieces and greatest scholars. At this point, Stanislavski and Gilyarovsky can really only be seen as giants walking among men. Try making a George Washington biopic without the historical, and especially fanciful, baggage that attends the name. There is an element of John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) in this film, too, another late film at the tail end of a great director's career that dealt with his legacy of a lifetime spent choosing between "the truth" and "the legend," choosing at all times to print the latter. *In the Moscow Slums* isn't a documentary, not even a Social Realist artifact, it's historical fiction as hagiography and - even better than all that - it's fully aware of itself as artifice. It is handsomely mounted and so pristine it plays like the

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science fiction it is: a Philip Jose Farmer mashup of famous heroes engaged in an alternate universe's creation stories. Compare it to Ford's westerns that for all the dust, never seemed dirty. When the men enter Khitrovka in the first third of Shakhnazarov's picture, it plays as exactly what it is: a theatrical recreation of a Moscow slum in 1902 when viewed through the eyes of a genius of the theater, Stanislavski, looking for inspiration for his art in the suffering and destitution of others. These people aren't quite human to him. They're characters for him to draw from, props designed for his moral development. It's not a failing of the film, it's a reminder in fact that there is no ethical way to portray real desperation in an entertainment and so why not portray, instead, how art tends to sanitize systemic depravity by finding morals and heroism in it?

Pushkin believed that free will and destiny are related rather than oppositional. You make a choice, and the outcome of that choice is unavoidable. His plays, including *Mozart & Salieri* (1830) which inspired Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* (1979) later adapted by Milos Foreman into a film (1984), deal as well with the individual's gradual evolution from tourist, to empathetic sharer, to existential horror: when seeking to distinguish oneself from the stink of the rabble, one realizes first that they are not only not special in any way, but indistinguishable from their *own* betters from those they once held in contempt. The journey of Stanislavski through this Slavic Inferno, arm-in-arm with another great chronicler of his space and time, leads him to the innermost circle that is occupied not by a congress of thieves straight out of *M* (1931), not some Dickensian organization of underworld criminals (a kid called "Pip" is a member of Gilyarovsky's version of the Baker Street Irregulars), but rather an insular cabal of antiques dealers of the merchant class who, from their slightly elevated post, seek to pillage from the lower classes (including, especially, immigrants and their heirlooms) to cater to the upper classes. What Stanislavski must learn is that he is no less a vaguely-interested collector of the life's product, and the lives themselves, of the people he is incapable of seeing as entirely people. What kills me is thinking of Shakhnazarov pointing the finger at himself, ultimately, as perhaps being guilty of the

same kind of detachment. Remember Gorky's monologue and the cheat's revelation that all Mankind are equally wonderful and equally loathsome? When Stanislavski, bewitched by fetching hostess Knyazhna (Anfisa Chernykh), asks for her company and then runs the Gorky monologue by her, she says that the only way to perform such a thing is to say it with a deep, debilitating irony. We may all be the same, so why don't we don't suffer the same way? Ignoring the gruesome realities of surviving is a privilege held exclusively by the wealthy. Later, she'll share her own exaggerated backstory with Stanislavski, telling about being orphaned and raised by a sickly char-woman before being turned out into prostitution. It's the kind of tale of sorrow men love to hear from the women they wish to collect and place upon their mantel. I think he would have bought it at the beginning of the film where every character Gilyarovsky describes to him in a cantina sequence as florid as the one in *Star Wars* (1977) is the product of similar tales of operatic misfortune; but now he sees right through Knyazhna's carefully-manufactured auto-mythology.

Stanislavski is evolving. The fascination of *In the Moscow Slums* is how his growth is disguised by a jaunty murder mystery involving artifacts from the mystical east, poisonous blowdarts employed by a murderous dwarf, and chases through the sewers and canals of a fantasy of pre-revolutionary/pre-Uprising Moscow. Indeed, the mystery is solved with a full twenty minutes of film left to unspool - twenty minutes not spent tying up loose ends, but rather finding Stanislavski on stage, opening night of the Gorky play that would enjoy an extended run as the playwright's first major success. Gorky based *The Lower Depths* on residents of the Bugrov Homeless Shelter in Nizhny Novgorod and provided photographs of the home and its occupants taken by Maxim Dmitriev to help the cast visualize costumes and makeup. More, what the photographs must have done is filled the actors with a sense of purpose in embodying the nobility, what we would celebrate as the *humanity* of those without the means themselves to attend a play fictionalizing, likely without permission and almost certainly without compensation, their lives. For Shakhnazarov to choose, of all Conan Doyle's Holmes pieces, *The Sign of the Four* to

combine with his historical fiction is telling, too, in how Conan Doyle's story is about priceless pearls stolen from India by a British army captain, a scheme of a collective of British colonizers fighting amongst themselves for sole ownership of the pilfered treasure. Holmes solves the case - but he never considers returning the jewels to their original owner.

There's more: One of Holmes' suspects is a soldier named Jonathan Small who has a henchman called "Tonga" whom Small rescues from the Andaman Islands and subsequently follows him "around like a dog." Tonga is described as a "pygmy" with "a great, misshapen head and a shock of tangled, dishevelled hair… his face was enough to give a man a sleepless night. Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty." When Holmes does further research, he finds Tonga's people are cannibals *unusually capable of loyalty*. In *In the Moscow Slums*, the existence of a mythical tribe of little people, armed with blowdarts and acting as familiars for the British Empire, is told as a possibility by a jovial, charming Anton Chekhov (Ivan Kolesnikov), enjoying dinner with Nemirovich Danchenko at that same chichi restaurant as a small squad of servers busy themselves making ice cream tableside with dry ice. "Science!" the patrons exclaim, celebrating how the wonders of the world have been harnessed to make a nice dessert with berries. Chekhov in 1902 is working on his last, great work *The Cherry Orchard* - the last of his four great plays that, through their productions at the Moscow Company Theater, made both of their names. He is also in the final stages of the tuberculosis that would kill him in 1904, the year *The Cherry Orchard* saw its first production under the guidance of one Konstantin Stanislavski. There's no sign of that illness in *In the Moscow Slums* however, as he presides over dinner with great alacrity - a regular Raymond Carver who recounts a trip he's made around the world where he heard tell of the kinds of human beasts that appear to now be on the prowl on the streets of their Moscow. Offensive? Dated in its racial insensitivity? Yes, all of those things, and present in this film by one of Russia's great modern satirists and historians as further evidence that this piece is about the inaccuracies and dehumanization endemic to representation of any "reality" through the arts.

The Gorky monologue again provides a viewing guide for this film: "Man alone exists—everything else is the creation of his hands and his brain!" It is, therefore, impossible to truly represent Man, even through the product of his hands and imagination. By extension, the attempt to do so will only ever result in fantasias: exaggerations and misunderstandings, anachronisms and whole-cloth fabrications. Faced with such a fact, what's left but to make a film that is about printing the legend while trusting the audience, whom we are told to never underestimate in the first five minutes of the film, to do a little detective work on their own. *In the Moscow Slums* is clearly a set of clues left for a careful, critical excavation. That it's fun without any kind of examination at all is just further evidence of a master of his craft executing an incredibly difficult trick like it was as simple, and perhaps as easy to miss, as breathing. Stanislavski wrote about Chekhov once that "Chekhov often expressed his thought not in speeches but in pauses or between the lines or in replies consisting of a single word ... the characters often feel and think things not expressed in the lines they speak." The truth is only ever possible when you are aware of the cracks and are curious as to what they might hold, you see. For a man who has spent his life in search of truth in the history of the land he loves, what an astounding, and beautiful, place to land here late in his career, here in his season of summation and reflection.

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In the Moscow Slums

by

Peter Rollberg

1

Karen Shakhnazarov became a household name in Russia in 1982 with the musical comedy *Jazzmen* (aka *We Are from Jazz*). Visualizing the early years of Soviet Russia with a nostalgic glow, this charming picture features an unusual openness toward Western culture, siding with jazz enthusiasts against dogmatic ideological watchdogs. The title characters embrace Jazz as an American grassroot phenomenon intrinsically related to the revolutionary spirit of Russia, a concept that is clearly endorsed by the filmmaker. And although the musicians face painful backlashes, they ultimately win their domestic culture war and in the end are granted official recognition.

Most remarkable about *Jazzmen* was its tone – relaxed, kindhearted, and generous – a new and unique phenomenon in Soviet cinema that has remained one of Shakhnazarov's signature features. Five years after *Jazzmen*, *The Courier* (1987) shot the young director to nationwide stardom. Its portrayal of a talented yet deeply unhappy

young eccentric resonated with tens of millions of Soviet viewers and impressed international audiences as well. Without explicitly saying so, Shakhnazarov's perestroika superhit signaled that the Communist project had reached its endpoint and that the young generation was neither able nor willing to continue what their parents and grandparents had believed in. Still, *The Courier* left the audience with a modicum of hope – unlike *Zerograd* (1989), arguably Shkahnazarov's best picture in cinematic terms, which revealed the absurdity of Soviet civilization with unprecedented sharpness and Kafkaesque pessimism. By the time of its release, millions of viewers counted Karen Shakhnazarov among their favorite filmmakers and remained his loyal followers even when the transition from socialism to neocapitalism pushed Russian cinema into a near-mortal crisis.

During the first post-Soviet decade, Shakhnazarov continued to bravely search for ways to stay connected with his audience – no easy undertaking in the 1990s when the formerly state-run distribution system was in tatters and watching movies in a theater was no longer part of average citizens' everyday life. In a surprise move, in 1998 Shakhnazarov agreed to take over the country's largest studio, Mosfilm, as director general. His decision came at a critical moment when Mosfilm seemed beyond rescue financially, logistically, and aesthetically. However, what many thought would be a short-lived affair turned into a success story as the director's skills in balancing the interests of private and state players were exactly what the moribund giant needed for survival and recovery. The combination of traditionalism – conspicuously, he kept the old Soviet Mosfilm logo featuring Vera Mukhina's sculpture "Worker and Kolkhoz Peasant" – with clever investment strategies and an eagerness to incorporate technical innovations eventually consolidated the studio's market position and secured its regular output. As chief executive, Shakhnazarov protected – under sometimes extremely adversarial circumstances – large segments of the legacy of Soviet cinema with a kind of respect and care that an ordinary bureaucrat would never have been able or willing to muster. To be sure, Shakhnazarov's career as an artist-cum-businessman is still awaiting its fair assessment.

The filmmaker's administrative clout allowed him to continue his directorial career as well. By Western standards, the budgets of Shakhnazarov's films were small to medium-size, but lavish in the post-Soviet context. Experimenting with a variety of themes and genres, the director made films with his preferred type of viewer in mind: educated, curious, sufficiently positive about the Soviet legacy, open toward Western innovations, and approaching life with forgiving irony. Shakhnazarov's post-Soviet films also display an unobtrusive but undeniable mysticism, especially when interpreting historical developments, as well as a growing endorsement of Eurasian influences in Russian civilization. In the 1990s, the narrative cohesion of his films became more experimental, most visibly in the loosely woven episodes of *Day of the Full Moon* (1998). In the new millennium, Shakhnazarov's historical thrillers (*A Rider Named Death*, 2004), literary adaptations (*Ward Six*, 2009), and nostalgic dramas (*The Vanished Empire*, 2019) feature more stringently structured narratives. At the same time, the director's attitude toward the West grew more and more skeptical; an example is the gloomy World War II extravaganza *White Tiger* (2012), which engages in dark prophecies about the inevitable clash between Western and Russian values.

2

Shakhnazarov's latest film, *In the Moscow Slums* (2022), represents a return to the light tone of his beginnings, although his approach toward the West is now the opposite of that in *Jazzmen* or *The Courier*. The film's original title, *Khitrovka.The Sign of Four*, refers to an old Moscow district not far from the city center. The district itself no longer exists but its name and surrounding legend are alive. Its name is associated with the dark milieu of lowlifes who populated the area from the late 19th to early 20th century. Originally acquired in 1823 by Nikolai Khitrovo, a retired general, the area was turned it into a mall with a wide variety of stores, the so-called Khitrov Market, or *Khitrovka*. In the 1860s, following the abolition of serfdom and subsequent mass migration of impoverished peasants to

the cities in search of jobs, Khitrovka morphed into Moscow's informal labor exchange for thousands of unskilled workers. Crammed into dirty flophouses, pubs, and brothels, these people were called *Khitrovantsy*. In 1911, an official census put their number at about 5,500, but in some years, an estimated 10,000 people lived in Khitrovka. As a showcase for societal degeneracy, Khitrovka piqued the curiosity of journalists, social activists, and bohemians who were fascinated by its tragic and dangerous exoticism. In 1923, the Bolsheviks decided to erase the unsightly place and erected a school in its stead. And yet, Khitrovka's unique genius loci remained intact.

A hotbed of poverty and crime and an inexhaustible source of drama, Khitrovka was made famous by Vladimir Gilyarovsky (1853-1935), a journalist who devoted his entire life to Moscow and Muscovites. "Uncle Gilyai," as he was lovingly called, knew even the most obscure corners of the old capital city and tirelessly recorded their inhabitants' stories. Gilyarovsky's articles quickly made him an authority in his own right, a proudly independent man who counted writer Ivan Bunin, painter Ilya Repin, and singer Fyodor Shalyapin among his friends. Gilyarovsky was a born storyteller – his articles and short stories earned him the title "King of Moscow reporters" – with a recognizable style: always entertaining, humane, empathetic, and socially alert. Gilyarovsky covered sensational events such as mysterious crimes and housefires, as well as national catastrophes such as the tragedy on Khodynka Field in 1896, a mass panic that broke out during the coronation of Nikolai II and took the lives of 2,000 people, most of whom were trampled to death. But Gilyarovsky was just as knowledgeable about Moscow's cultural life and competently discussed the latest theater premieres and art exhibitions. The writer Aleksandr Kuprin quipped that it was easier to imagine Moscow without the Kremlin's legendary Tsar Bell and Tsar Cannon than without Vladimir Gilyarovsky. Anton Chekhov encouraged Gilyarovsky to publish his texts in book form, the first of which, *The Slums of Moscow*, appeared in 1887, became a bestseller, and was followed by dozens of others. Eventually, several multivolume editions of Gilyarovsky's Collected Works were published both in pre-Soviet and Soviet years.

In 1902, Gilyarovsky agreed to take the founders of the Moscow Art Theater, Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, as well as set designer Nikolai Simov on a tour of the infamous Khitrovka. Earlier that year, Maxim Gorky had sold his play *The Lower Depths* to the innovative stage company, initiating a new era in Russian theater that soon would resonate worldwide. The play takes place in a homeless shelter and features a motley crowd of tenants with nothing left in life. In one of the most impressive scenes, the thief Satin delivers a monologue that soon became famous and eventually a cliché: "A human being – how proud that sounds…" It is documented that Stanislavski, who was not only the director of the production but also the first actor to portray Satin, struggled with that monologue: whatever intonation he tried, the words came out hollow and inauthentic. His expedition to Khitrovka was meant to familiarize him, the offspring of a wealthy merchant family, with a milieu he had never seen. This true story of a seasoned reporter introducing a great theater pioneer to the unsightly center of deprivation in capitalist Russia is the frame narrative of Shakhnazarov's film. It also functions as the conceptual arc that connects the opening and concluding episodes, when Stanislavski pronounces Satin's words in an entirely new tone, inspired by sincere, heartfelt humanism and hope for humankind.

Thus, Shakhnazarov begins his film with a question of fundamental importance for theater and cinema: how can artists achieve truthfulness when dealing with aspects of life that they have never experienced? In the late 19th century, truth became the fundamental criterion in Russian culture and was central to the mission of the Moscow Art Theater. Working with Chekhov since the mid-1890s, Stanislavski liberated theater from theatricality with respect to decorations, intonations, and body language. His theoretical principles later became vital for cinema, especially in the sound era. But could mastering "method acting" suffice for a wealthy bourgeois to realistically play a homeless man? How can refined intellectuals portray members of the "lower depths," their biographical baggage, interests, beliefs, and prejudices? The realist Anton Chekhov, who appears in the film in a funny cameo, knew poverty and

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exploitation firsthand. Born into an impoverished, provincial lower middleclass family, he kept in touch with members of all social strata through his medical practice, research, and travel. Maxim Gorky, whom Shakhnazarov shows briefly on stage bowing to the audience, had run away from his bankrupt family as a teenager and learned about Russia's lower depths as a hobo and unskilled laborer, years that he later called *My Universities*. Konstantin Stanislavski had nothing to match Chekhov's and Gorky's life experiences. Of course, one should keep in mind that his brief expedition to Khitrovka did not bring him in contact with genuine proletarians or peasants: what he encountered was the motley milieu of the lumpenproletariat, a fluid stratum distrusted by Lenin and the Bolsheviks – and a source of endless fascination for Bohemians. This was indeed the milieu in which *The Lower Depths* is set and the one best known to Gilyarovsky. It was Khitrovka's assortment of alcoholics, criminals, and prostitutes that served Stanislavski as a key to defining the essence of humanity, praised by Gorky in Satin's famous words.

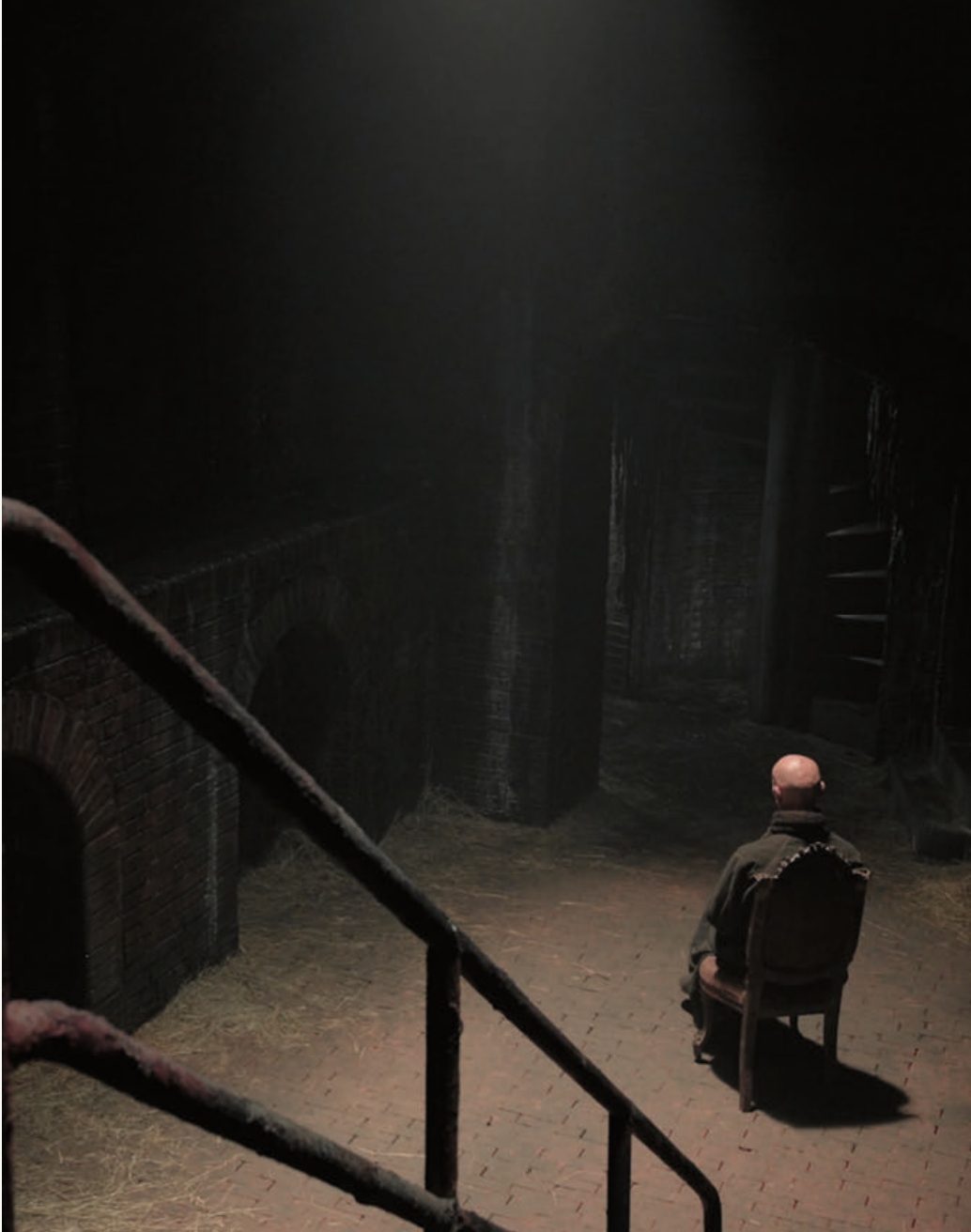
In the Moscow Slums portrays Stanislavski as an erudite who is saved from snobbism by his honest passion for truth – the truth of human beings, of social milieus, and of living speech. In less than a decade, he and Chekhov introduced to the Russian stage a sobriety and realism that would ban pathos of any kind. Unlike Mikhail Bulgakov's delightful caricature in his *Theater Novel*, the Stanislavsky of Shakhnazarov's film may be amusing in his social naïvete, but is dead serious about finding the truth of life and bringing it to the stage. We can assume that Stanislavski's obsession with truth and truthfulness is shared, to a certain extent, by the filmmaker Shakhnazarov. Like all Soviet schoolchildren, he must have been bombarded ad nauseam with Gorky's/Satin's words about the proud sound of the word "human being," words that had degenerated into a proto-communist slogan. Conspicuously, beginning with his debut, *Good People* (1979), Shakhnazarov has always avoided sloganeering; his characters pronounce even the loftiest thoughts in laidback fashion. Thus, Stanislavski's difficulties mastering Gorky's signature lines is one that Shakhnazarov surely can relate to. Closing his film with the same words,

now uttered with an entirely new intonation – cleansed of declamatory pathos, filled with pensive sadness and carried by a new faith – is the culmination of Shakhnazarov's *In the Moscow Slums*, a moment of artistic triumph.

A challenge for the director was to avoid any undue modernization of Stanislavski's and Gilyarovsky's characters so that they would come across as belonging to their own era and not act like spokespersons for ours. The director and his performers invested much energy in order to provide the two leads with a believable psychological and social profile. Some controversial aspects were left out, though. For example, Stanislavski's love-hate relationship with his versatile artistic and business partner Nemirovich-Danchenko, is shown in a more amicable light, although it is clear how different these two innovators were. The practical Nemirovich acts as an enabler who acquaints the eager but inexperienced Stanislavsky with the certified supplier of truth, writer and journalist Vladimir Gilyarovsky. It is worth mentioning that in later decades, all three of them managed to survive the turbulent transition from Imperial Russia to the Soviet regime, from decadent fin de siècle to early communist modernity and even Stalinism, maintaining their independence and self-worth with demonstrative apoliticality and political flexibility, but without resorting to treason or opportunism.

3

After Shakhnazarov opens *In the Moscow Slums* with the moral imperative to find social and psychological truth, one would normally expect as the next logical step a gripping moralistic tale about the lessons learned by Stanislavski about human nature from his tour of the *real* lower depths. Classical Soviet cinema could have supplied plenty such tales: stories of noble underdogs who preach to the intellectual about compassion and solidarity; of class conscious proletarians who are building a bright future and convince the rich man of goodwill to join their fight; or of a poor



but passionate beauty who is unimpressed and incorruptible by material temptations and follows her class instinct instead. Which brings us to the most unexpected part of Shakhnazarov's picture: its combination of a realistic framework – explicitly addressing the issue of realism and truthfulness! – with an unrealistic Western import, namely, Arthur Conan Doyle's crime novel *The Sign of the Four* (1890). It surely takes a heavy dose of suspension of disbelief to accept the transformation of two intellectual Muscovites into an investigative tandem, a quasi-Sherlock Holmes and a quasi-Dr. Watson, researching a very British crime plot that has little to do with real life anywhere, least of all Moscow and the Khitrovka slums. To be sure, the accidental Russian detectives stand their ground within that plot transplant and even defeat the foreign criminal mastermind and his colonial sidekick at their cunning game of greed, lies, and murder. But do the philosophical frame narrative and the trivial crime plot mix, or do they remain separate like oil and water? Was it perhaps the filmmaker's intention to demonstrate the incompatibility of Russian and Western culture?

Let's settle for the hypothesis that the screenwriters and the director attempted this strange blend as an experiment for the pure joy of the game. For Shakhnazarov, this would not be the first time. In *Anna Karenina: The Story of Vronsky* (2017) he combined, as if tired of the repetitiveness and predictability of *Anna Karenina* adaptations, Tolstoy's adultery plot with nonfiction motifs from Vikenti Veresaev's book about the 1904 Russo-Japanese War. The film begins with an encounter between Anna's son and the aging Vronsky after battle, which makes for an unexpected, albeit not entirely motivated opening. To be sure, Shakhnazarov's Tolstoy variation as a whole found few admirers and flopped critically and commercially, but, unlike most previous attempts, it positioned Anna's tragedy and its aftermath in a precise historical context. *In the Moscow Slums* is similarly experimental, interweaving seemingly incompatible plot segments taken from highbrow (*The Lower Depths*), middlebrow (Gilyarovsky's Khitrovka reports), and popular genres (Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*). Conspicuously, and unlike Shakhnazarov's

experiment on Tolstoy's fiction, these segments come from Russian and Western culture. Those Russian critics who chastised the director for trying to force together what by definition could not blend, overlooked Shakhnazarov's deeper intentions. *In the Moscow Slums* shows that the intrusion of a ruthless English sophisticate into the lower depths of Russia wreaks havoc but yields no satisfying end result, if one discounts the elimination of the intruder. For Gilyarovsky and Stanislavski, their brief engagement in an imported crime mystery is a distraction at best.

In the Moscow Slums contains another element from Shakhnazarov's earlier films, albeit a marginal one: the aggressor from Britain, driven by irrepressible greed, arrives in Russia under the label of a fake charity, "Angels of Mercy." Just like the eponymous White Tiger from the 2012 war mystery, the Briton appears indestructible, coming back again and again like a monster from a horror film before being ingloriously blown up by a dense tsarist police chief. Thus, while the central mystery plot takes inspiration from an arch-British narrative, its inclusion also shows the innate limitations of those foreign aggressors: no matter how hard they try, the agent and his sidekick cannot defeat united Muscovite power.

Ч

The film's title indicates that *class* is of central importance. Indeed, class distinctions generally are significant in Shakhnazarov's films, starting with the delightful depiction of the Russian intelligentsia in his 1979 *Good People*. An emphasis on class attributes and attribution was, of course, a must in Soviet movies, especially when they depicted the pre-Soviet era. For Soviet cinema, the crucial point was to demonstrate that class differences were the source of all evil and had to be removed by revolutionary force as soon as history presented such a chance. The first episodes of *In the Moscow Slums* seem to indicate that Shakhnazarov adopted that view – which, by the way, is shared by many Western observers, namely, that the insurmountable gap between rich and

poor in capitalist Russia will eventually lead to a gigantic clash that will tear the entire empire to shreds. However, the film demonstrates that Shakhnazarov's approach to class is one of friendly irony. Sure, the appearance of the plebeian Gilyarovsky in an upscale Moscow restaurant is seen as inappropriate; it takes the interference of the wealthy Nemirovich-Danchenko to get him admitted. But neither bourgeois arrogance, nor the abysmal conditions of the Khitrovka district are used as arguments for the need to change the world in a radical communist manner, as they would have been in a classical Soviet movie. Rather, the Khitrovka slums appear as an exotic habitat for lowlifes of all colors who will always exist, regardless of society's class structure. This habitat has its own laws and its own pride and, despite inherent dangers, deserves to be protected from outside aggression just like the other segments of society. After all, while hosting vulgarity, disease, and crime, Khitrovka is also the place to which "the Princess," the ideal Russian beauty, belongs and where she prefers to live in the end – a point not lost on the two accidental detectives admiring her. Not once in the film do Gilyarovsky and Stanislavski lament social inequality or dream about abolishing and replacing it with a "classless" society. Instead, they accept the existence of rich and poor, of suffering, and indulging as a given that will forever be part of the human condition.

Apparently, such acceptance is an integral part of Shakhnazarov's worldview. The director's fatalism with regard to class already could be felt in his earliest films of the Soviet period in which he diagnosed the communist nation's ideological exhaustion without proposing a return to old Marxist-Leninist solutions. In Shakhnazarov's films, the real source of danger for society is not the existence and reappearance of class differences, corruption, and privileges, but external forces that try to undermine Russia's internal status quo for their own gain. *In the Moscow Slums* attributes this role, rather playfully, to the eerie British spy and his disfigured colonial weapon. Conspicuously, it is the colonel of the tsarist police – a character traditionally depicted as obtuse and hostile – whose marksmanship defeats the foreign intruders. This colonel, whose constant orders to "not touch anything at the crime scene" reveal his

narrowmindedness and lack of analytical wit, is invited to the premiere of *The Lower Depths* in the end, signaling that he, too, is vital for society, even though Gorky's play puts him to sleep and he is clueless with respect to its subversiveness. This is yet another sign of Shakhnazarov's deep-rooted acceptance of Russian society: there will always be corruption, there will always be a privileged minority, an underprivileged majority, and an oppressive stratum to secure the power of the few over the many, and there is nothing to be done about it. This fatalism previously appeared in Shakhnazarov's historical comedies, pointing to the repetitiveness of history.

5

In the Moscow Slums bewildered many Russian critics. Some approached this cultural hybrid as a historical comedy whose attempted synthesis of Gorky, Stanislavski, Gilyarovsky, and Conan Doyle resulted in little more than a predictable failure. But would an experienced filmmaker really have gone to such efforts transplanting an exotic crime plot (which was already adapted by Soviet filmmakers in the 1980s) with the intention to demonstrate its compatibility with Russian reality? Was the painstaking reconstruction of Khitrovka merely meant as a denunciation of past injustice? Is it not more plausible to view this film as a *sociocultural parable*, similar to *Zerograd* and *The White Tiger*?

Shakhnazarov's latest film mixes the unmixable with a light touch. Through a unique combination of genres and aesthetic concepts, the director presents his own paradoxical view of Russian culture, its sociopolitical foundations, and its complex relationship with the West. On the one hand, he demonstrates the incompatibility between Russian and Western values. On the other, he praises the inherent *continuity* of Russian culture, its ability to survive even the deadliest turbulences and external assaults. For him, the Moscow Art Theater's greatness is based on its exemplary synthesis of highbrow and lowbrow, realism and sophistication.

The film makes clear that Shakhnazarov views himself as part of this continuity and synthesis, even if only a few critics are able or willing to recognize this. After all, apart from being exceptional artists, Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko were skillful entrepreneurs, too. Thus, *In the Moscow Slums* can best be understood as a credo narrative of a self-confident filmmaker-cum- master administrator who is socially aware but not revolutionary; patriotic but open to the world; statist but harboring no illusions about the reality of the Russian state.

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